

CLAIMS

1. A voice service system comprising:

- an interactive voice response unit for interactively dealing with a call from a human caller,
- an operator subsystem by which a human operator can verbally interact with the caller, and
- a transfer arrangement for transferring handling of the call at least in one direction between the operator subsystem and the voice response unit;

5 10 the operator subsystem including a masking arrangement for causing the operator's verbal interaction with the caller to be done through a synthesised voice whereby to mask from the caller that they are talking to a human operator, the transfer arrangement being usable by the operator to have handling of a call transferred to the voice response unit.

15 2. A voice service system according to claim 1, wherein the masking arrangement comprises text response means for generating text messages from the operator, and means for passing these messages to a text-to-speech converter for output to the caller.

20 3. A voice service system according to claim 2, wherein the text-to-speech converter is part of the voice response unit and provides the same synthesised voice to the caller whether the call is being handled by the operator subsystem or by the voice response unit.

4. A voice service system according to claim 2, wherein the text response means comprises a keyboard for operator entry of text messages.

25 5. A voice service system according to claim 2, wherein the text response means comprises a speech recogniser for receiving voice input from the operator and generating text messages.

30 6. A voice service system according to claim 5, wherein the text messages output by the speech recogniser are passed to an editing console of the operator subsystem to enable the operator to check and edit the messages prior to output to the text-to-speech converter.

7. A voice service system according to claim 1, wherein the transfer arrangement includes an analysis subsystem for analysing the caller's inputs when the voice response unit is handling the call whereby to determine whether the caller requires operator assistance; the 5 analysis subsystem being operative, upon determining that the caller requires operator assistance, to cause the transfer arrangement to transfer the call to the operator subsystem.

8. A voice service system comprising an interactive voice response unit for interactively dealing with a call from a human caller, an operator subsystem by which a human operator 10 can verbally interact with the caller, and transfer means for transferring handling of the call between the voice response unit and the operator subsystem; the voice service system having masking means for causing the operator's verbal interaction with the caller to be done through a synthesised voice whereby to mask from the caller that they are now talking to a human operator, the transfer means being usable by the operator to have handling of a 15 call transferred to the voice response unit.

9. A method of providing voice services in respect of a call placed by a human caller, the method comprising the steps of :

(a) carrying out a verbal interaction between the caller and a human operator;

20 (b) at the instigation of the operator, transferring the call to an interactive voice response unit; and

(c) continuing verbal interaction with the caller through the voice response unit.

the operator's verbal interaction with the caller in step (a) being done through a synthesised voice whereby to mask from the caller that they are talking to a human operator.

25

10. A method according to claim 9, wherein the operator's verbal interaction with the caller involves generating a text message from operator input and passing this message through a text-to-speech converter to output the operator input in said synthesized voice.

30 11. A method according to claim 10, wherein the text-to-speech converter is part of the voice response unit and provides the same synthesised voice to the caller whether the call is interaction with the operator or the voice response unit.

12. A method according to claim 10, wherein the operator generates the text message using a keyboard.

5 13. A method according to claim 10, wherein the operator generates the text message through a speech recogniser.

10 14. A method according to claim 13, wherein the text message output by the speech recogniser is checked and, where required, edited by the operator at an editing console prior to output to the text-to-speech converter.

15. A method of providing voice services in respect of a call placed by a human caller, the method comprising the steps of :

15 (a) enabling voice interaction between the caller and a voice response unit;

20 (b) analysing the caller's interaction with the voice response unit to determine whether the caller requires operator assistance;

20 (c) where this analysis indicates that operator assistance is required, transferring the call to a human operator; and

20 (d) carrying out a verbal interaction between the caller and a human operator, this interaction being done through a synthesized voice whereby to mask from the caller that they are talking to a human operator.

25 16. A method according to claim 15, wherein the operator's verbal interaction with the caller involves generating a text message from operator input and passing this message through a text-to-speech converter to output the operator input in said synthesized voice.

30 17. A method according to claim 16, wherein the text-to-speech converter is part of the voice response unit and provides the same synthesised voice to the caller whether the call is interaction with the operator or the voice response unit.

30 18. A method according to claim 16, wherein the operator generates the text message using a keyboard.

19. A method according to claim 16, wherein the operator generates the text message through a speech recogniser.